

Decision needed on water request

Daily Herald Editorial Board

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We know the Illinois Department of Natural Resources has had a lot on its plate these days, and as a result, some issues get pushed to the back burner. However, there is one piece of unfinished business the IDNR must address as quickly as possible: a request from a group of Lake County communities to draw water from Lake Michigan.

The Northern Lake County Lake Michigan Water Planning Group, with members from nine communities and unincorporated Lake County, is anxiously awaiting a decision so it can get to the business of planning future water use.

At stake are millions of dollars and several years of construction if the request is approved. If it's not approved, the towns will have to start searching for other options. And in the scheme of such things, they need to start making their plans as soon as possible. The group submitted its request to the state back in January and was expecting a ruling by July. However, the IDNR decision has been delayed for the third time in three months. IDNR officials say it is unclear when they will decide. A story this week by the Daily Herald's Lee Filas focused on one of the members, Volo, in the far western portion of the county, where officials see lake water as key to the village's future growth. Planners believe more than 11,000 new residents will move into Volo in the next 20 years.

Mayor Burnell Russell said lake water would allow his tiny village to avoid drilling more deep wells, at an estimated cost of \$1 million each, as well as paying to treat radium found in the water supplies beneath Volo.

That treatment now costs the village \$150,000 annually with five wells in operation. The costs surely would rise if a lot more wells came on line.

Other towns in the group also are concerned. They're all familiar with a long-range study by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning that predicts demand rising through 2050, with forecasts of serious water shortages in 11 northeastern Illinois counties.

But that's not to say the decision to draw more water from Lake Michigan is one to be taken lightly. The lake is a magnificent resource, critically important to the entire Chicago region, and there are limits to how much of it can be spread around. Communities are allowed to take 3,200 gallons per second from the lake, and currently, 97 percent of that amount is used by the city of Chicago and other suburbs. If this newest Lake County consortium taps into the resource, only 1.5 percent of the remaining allocation would be available in the future.

So, yes, it's a delicate decision. But it needs to be made - one way or the other. Consortium members must determine which direction to go - plan a \$252 million project to lay 57 miles of pipe over an estimated four years or start looking now for another answer to their water needs.

